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ABSTRACT

This booklet draws on the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) geography survey of 1988 and shapes recommendations for practices that will make teachers more effective in stimulating student excitement about this increasingly important subject. The assessment surveyed more than 3,000 high school seniors in approximately 300 public and private schools. Questions asked included: (1) Why study geography?; (2) If geography is so important, why was it dropped from the school curriculum?; (3) What geographic knowledge and skills should every student possess?; and (4) Does it really matter if young citizens do not know geography? Suggestions are made to parents, teachers, and administrators about specific actions they can take to improve geography learning in U.S. schools. The document also provides some suggestions for statewide, schoolwide, familial, and individual responses to the alarm raised by the NAEP and other surveys chronicling geographic ignorance. A 9-item reference list is provided. (KM)

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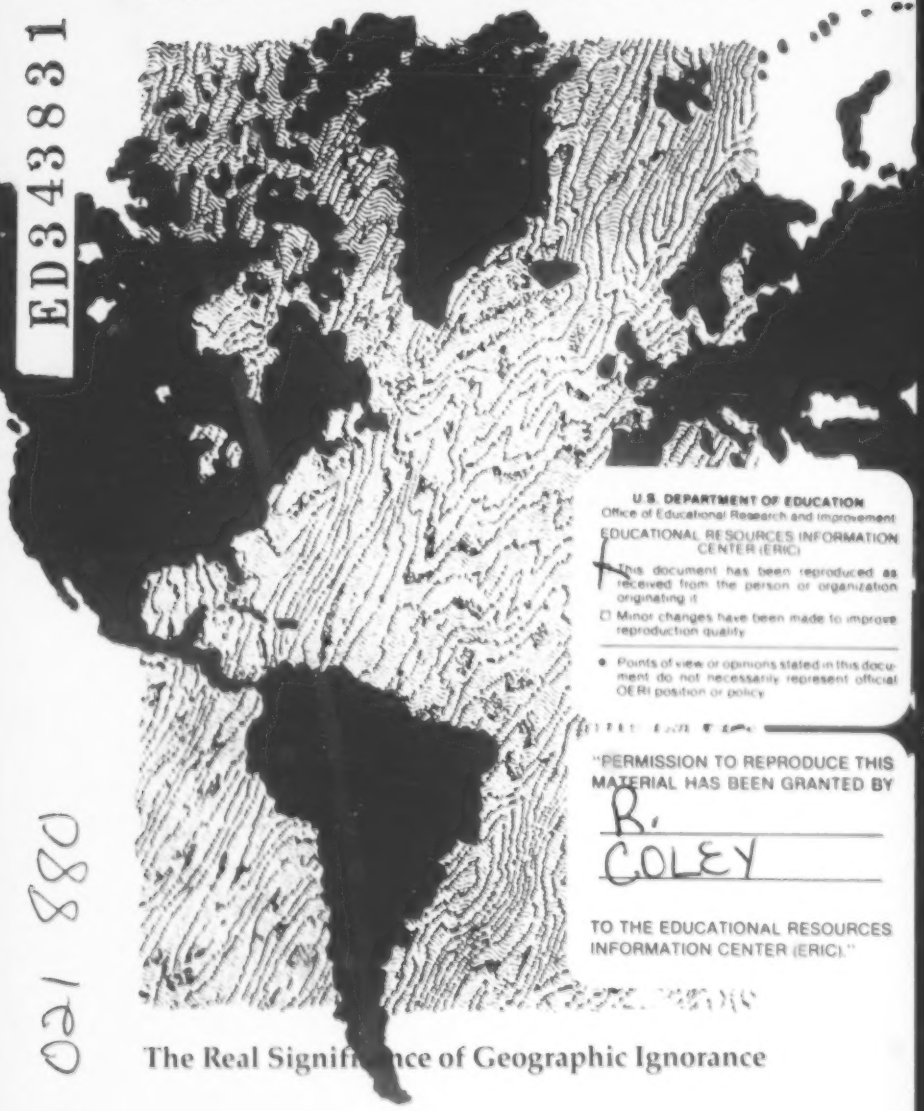

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The Real Signifi[illegible]nce of Geographic Ignorance

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Missing the Magic Carpet

The Real Significance of Geographic Ignorance

by Christopher L. Salter
November 1990

Educational Testing Service

How can NAEP results help teachers? This perennial question has challenged those associated with the National Assessment of Educational Progress for years.

This booklet is one answer. In its pages an inspired, dedicated teacher and teacher trainer — the Chair of Geography at the University of Missouri, Columbia — looks at NAEP findings and makes suggestions to parents, teachers and administrators about specific actions they can take to improve geography learning in America's schools.

But he does much more than that.

Salter shares his enthusiasm, and his sense of adventure about the subject, as well as his convictions about the potential impact on students' perceptions of solid geographic knowledge and skills.

This booklet is more than a teacher's resource. It draws on the NAEP findings and shapes recommendations for practices that will make teachers more effective in stimulating student excitement about this increasingly important subject.

We are all indebted to the National Geographic Society for its support of this project.

Archie E. Lapointe
Educational Testing Service

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"When we are told by a former Superintendent of Public Schools in the District of Columbia that one in four students questioned could not locate the Soviet Union on a map, and when she also tells us that their surveys showed that one in seven Americans cannot find the U.S. on a map, it is time to do more than worry or just throw up our hands."

(Weinberger 1989: 31)

"Most students did not demonstrate an understanding of the basic concepts of physical and cultural geography, and many did not correctly identify the locations of major countries, cities, and landmarks."

(Allen et al. *The Geography Learning of High-School Seniors.* Princeton, NJ. Educational Testing Service, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1990)

"Americans, however, appear to be seriously lacking in basic geographic knowledge and skills. This is particularly true of the youngest age group tested, those between the ages of 18 and 24."

(Gallup Survey, 1988: 3)

As you ponder these quotes, you are very likely to say to yourself, "Oh, no. Not more statistics on the geographic ignorance of Americans. Save me from the endlessness of such news." That reaction combines embarrassment and wonder that such facts could really be true. You are also likely to be disturbed by the frequency with which you have read, heard, or seen such news in the past five years.

Geography has been a "hot" media item ever since Gilbert M. Grosvenor, president and chairman of the National Geographic Society, began decrying the absence or failure of geography teaching in American schools in *National Geographic* magazine. The monthly President's Page in the magazine carries comment on themes of importance to the Society. In June 1985, Mr. Grosvenor began the call for a "turnaround" in American education in and attitudes toward geography (Grosvenor, 1985). In the five years since that alarm, the Society, print and TV media, professional educators, academic geographers, and, increasingly, the American public have expressed mounting concern over our national levels of geographic ignorance and the associated educational quandary.

Ironically, the same polls that cite our weaknesses in formal geography training also tell us that, as a people, we believe it is important for the educated person to know something about the world we live in — knowledge that is one of the many aspects of geography. The irony does not end there. Despite our woeful lack of knowledge and understanding of our planet:

▶ Both print and electronic media respond continually to our manifest wish to be in touch with distant lands and their peoples.

▶ Never have we, as a people, bought more books, watched more TV, or gone to the movies more often — and all the events we watch or read about occur in distinctive places with their own cultural landscapes, which are sought by people with generally articulated preferences for certain environments.

All these activities should be interwoven with knowledge of, and interest in, the geography of this world. Yet our understanding of these geographic elements — location, landscape, environmental manipulation and associated attitudes, movement, and regional characteristics — remains minimal, according to many polls and surveys.

The questions that must be addressed are:

What is the *real significance* of geographic illiteracy? How can we square our popular belief that the broader world is interesting with our clear lack of interest in learning about that world?

Are we content to let the world's images roll endlessly in front of our largely indifferent consciousness?

Here are some thoughts on why the questions are significant, and some ideas about what can be done to rectify the situation.

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The Problem. Before the 1988 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) geography survey of more than 3000 high school seniors in approximately 300 public and private schools (*Geography Learning*, 1990), most of the lore on geographic ignorance was anecdotal. In December 1985, a Los Angeles radio program featured a 20-question contest between two Southern California teenagers, in which not a single one of the first 20 questions was answered correctly. The winner was finally selected because she knew that the Liberty Bell was located in Philadelphia — one right answer in 21 questions marked a winner! Such instances, however, were too few, too painful, and too casual to sustain a serious campaign for better geography; more objective data had to be gained. The NAEP geography survey was created and administered for just this purpose.

The results for high school seniors that NAEP reported in February 1990 not only demonstrated the weakness of the education of our high school students in geography; it also set the stage for a useful articulation of the sorts of geographic knowledge that professional educators and geographers consider essential for intelligent and productive citizenship in the contemporary world.

The array of knowledge tested in the NAEP survey included knowing locations, using the skills and tools of geography (latitude, longitude, map and globe symbols, and map interpretation), and cultural and physical geography (*Geography Learning*, 1990). The significance of this collection of themes is that all serious students of geographic learning realize that the image of geography is too often limited to map identifications (state capitals and country names, for example) and must be changed if educators are to enlist the help of the American public in eliminating geographic ignorance.

In July 1988, results of a geography survey administered late in April by the Gallup Poll were announced. This poll was another effort to elevate public awareness of geographic illiteracy from the "geography horror stories" related from small surveys done by the media to a broad-based, objective examination of both popular knowledge and attitudes. The poll was given to more than 10,000 respondents in one-on-one interviews in nine countries (Gallup Survey, 1988). Questions included not just map and place identifications but also substantive geographic questions and attitude markers. Like the NAEP survey reported in 1990, the results accentuated the call for geography learning that goes beyond capes and bays and state capitals.

From the Gallup and NAEP information, it is clear that the nation needs to strengthen geography education from more than one perspective:

▶ Educators must acknowledge the inadequacy of American knowledge of simple locational geography;

▶ Americans must expand their understanding of geography to include the more dynamic elements of landscape manipulation, the marvelous individuality of places and peoples, and the analysis of associated spatial patterns; and

▶ Our nation must understand the relevance of broader geographic knowledge throughout our lives; it has never been as critical as it is now, and it promises to grow in importance as we move toward increased global interdependence in the 1990s and the 21st century.

Our daily lives are infused with geographic issues, both on a local scale and a global one. As a result, American education is presented not only with the need to (re)introduce significant geographic learning related to the fundamental skills of place identification and place analysis, but also to top geography's potential to promote understanding of our world and its constituent parts (Hill 1989).

The Solutions. Like so many educational problems, the solutions to geographic ignorance extend far beyond formal education. Learning, like life itself, is a mosaic of experiences and efforts. Consider some basic questions that might lead to useful strategies for combating geographic ignorance.

▶ *"Why geography?"* In order to create any solution, there must first be recognition of the need. Caspar Weinberger pointed out the need for geographic knowledge as follows:

> **It is a cliche [but many cliches are true] to say that the world is shrinking and that more and more events impact, or will impact, the U.S. The coming Common Market in 1992; the transfer of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997; the American trade deficit; and even the enormously heartening daily rejection of Communism by the millions of people who have been forced to live under its thumb all of their lives — all of these and many more events will have a vital impact on America. If we are educated enough to realize it and knowledgeable enough about other countries, we can profit in every sense of the word from these amazing changes... All of this starts with geography. (Weinberger, 1989:31)**

It is precisely this use of geography — as a vehicle for getting in touch with distant lands and peoples — that must be achieved. For example, to find meaning in the stunning rapidity and vast dimensions of political change in Eastern Europe over the past year requires that one know the geopolitical history of that region between France, the Low Countries, the Iberian Peninsula, and historic Germany, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other. It was not simply World War II that spawned the idea of a political and spatial buffer zone between the USSR and Western Europe — it was more than a century (some would say more than a millennium) of ethnic and economic tension between those players. Such an understanding of geopolitics is one prime facet of geography.

The significance of what is going to happen to Hong Kong within the next five or six years defies the glib shorthand of a geography trivia game. The whole nature of the Pacific Rim — its trade, its demographic shifts, and its political stability —all relate at one level or another to the forces of change in China, and Hong Kong is a major factor in that equation.

Any effective solution to geographic ignorance entails knowing — and appreciating — the nature, location, and significance of the dynamic forces at work in the world. If students cannot differentiate between Panama and Poland, between Hong Kong and Honduras, between Armenia and Alabama, then there is no foundation upon which to build an essential understanding of cultural and political systems. These systems will play an ever-expanding role in the very economic and social universe in which these students must play out their lives.

▶ ***"If geography is so important, why have we dropped it from our schools' curriculum?"*** This is a just question. In the 19th century, geography was paired with history as a curriculum element nearly as basic as English. Since the emergence of Social Studies in 1916, geography has been increasingly pushed aside. Because of the tendency for teachers and principals alike to assume that geography was somehow incorporated in any or all other studies, smaller periods of time were specifically earmarked for geography.

The fault for this does not, however, lie simply on the shoulders of educational administrators. Many of the most productive geography faculty have set their roots in the more specialized world of geography at research universities. This has meant, consequently, giving less attention to the training of teachers. It has also meant a

diminished presence of geography in the minds of classroom teachers, as the major university faculty delegated their teaching responsibilities to teaching assistants. With no one to remind these people of how critical the discipline is to a broad-based education, fewer and fewer schools carried geography as part of the curriculum.

Over the past three decades, there has been extraordinary pressure on the schools to expand the curriculum to include instruction focused on a plethora of legitimate social concerns. This competition for time in the school day has made it even more difficult for geography to secure an adequate niche in the curriculum. Perhaps the school day, the school week, or the school year needs to be extended. The point is that we cannot expect students to learn geography if they are not instructed in it.

▶ ***"What geographic knowledge and skills should every student possess?"*** One of the most useful aspects of the NAEP survey was the development of a consensus regarding a framework of essential skills in geography. This view of basic and critical competence in the discipline included three realms of knowledge and skills (*Geography Objectives*, 1988). Each realm was determined to be essential to useful geographic education.

Geographic skills and tools make up the first realm introduced to the student. They include skills in map and chart reading, as well as understanding globes. Another basic in this realm is comprehending latitude and longitude as a coordinate system that defines an exact and unique location for every place on the face of the globe.

Content was the second fundamental area, with focus on cultural and physical geography. Cultural geography deals with the patterns and processes that characterize human manipulation of the earth and its landscapes. This realm embraces everything from the transformation of forests into farmland to the building of cities out of marshlands on river flood plains. Physical geography looks at the landforms, the climate, the soils, and the hydrology of the earth's surface. This provides an understanding of resources, of land use and potential land use, of the nature of physical impediments to settlement and transportation, and of the processes that create a useful or a despoiled landscape from these various elements.

Geographic inquiry was the final realm of the objectives. This facet of geography is the gateway to intellectual development in the discipline. Why have we created the sorts of landscapes we have? Why have some regions of the world been very productive and expansionist in some eras and quiescent in others? What has been the role of climate, of physical landscape, of location, in different eras of human development? These questions, and the analyses required in order to answer them, are illustrative of this realm of geography.

This set of skills, knowledge, and mental perspectives represents educational material that can be presented productively in the early grades and recur throughout a thoughtful person's education. Geographic inquiry can stimulate the mind through observation, speculation, analysis, and evaluation (Salter 1989).

▶ ***"Does it really matter if a young citizen does not know any geography?"*** This question is asked of virtually everyone who faces a class of high school kids, a

Rotary Club, a group of tired parents after work, or — most powerfully — a group of social studies teachers at the beginning of an after-school, two-hour in-service session. The corollary is the observation: "Hey...my kids seem to find their way to concerts, the movies, the beach, and the mall. They can't be quite as ignorant as the surveys say!"

In a broad sense, this dichotomy probably exists in most areas of education. The Bradley Commission finds that students know little history, but every kid on the block knows when a different group took over the park down by the school (*Building a History Curriculum*, 1988). Mathematics and engineering are not strong in American education, yet kids can figure out mileage and gas economy to run their parents' car past empty before they return it from a day-long outing. A student may be unable to identify four of ten states in the northeastern corner of a map of the United States, but he or she can use an information map in a regional shopping mall to tell you exactly where to find the hottest, the cheapest, or the most trendy athletic shoes.

The fact is that there is *education*, and there is ***Education.*** In the context of geographic learning, we are most concerned with ***Education,*** the formal acquisition of useful and substantial skills that will link a student — a future decision-making, wage-earning citizen — with the world *beyond* that park by the school, *beyond* one day's driving range in the family car, and *beyond* the regional shopping mall.

Geography ***Education*** is made vital by the subject's capacity to give shape, personality, and meaning to a world made up of strange words such as San Salvador, Sophia, Medellin, and the once significant Berlin Wall.

There is much in *Education* that must seem inconsequential to adolescents caught up in their personal Worlds. The same could be said for young parents, for a person just divorcing, for a couple seeing their last child go away to school, and for individuals attempting to cope with mid-life crises or retirement. Education waits for no one to adjust life's circumstances and be "ready to learn." The call for decisions, for knowledge, for intelligent reactions to daily events is relentless. This capacity to deal with such a significant and demanding call is as common to geography as to political science, sociology, ecology, and other disciplines that relate human beings to each other and to their environments.

A Closer Consideration of What Has to Be Done. Our shelves are filled with reports, monographs, commission exhortations, and fancy form letters from major educators asking us for a little time and effort (and, usually, money) to help overcome some dreadful educational shortcoming. Here are some suggestions for statewide, schoolwide, familial, and individual responses to the alarm raised by the NAEP, Gallup, and other surveys chronicling geographic ignorance.

Statewide Solutions. Since 1986, the National Geographic Society has supported the development and growth of Geographic Alliances. As of September 1990, 41 states either have alliances or have planning grants and are poised to become alliances. The Society provides up to $50,000 annually, which is matched by another $50,000 from the state government, in-state industries, or a combination of sources. This budget provides funds for activities that are focused largely on teacher training, summer geography institutes, the preparation of materials that speak to the local and state curricula, newsletters, and the promotion of improved pre-service and in-service teacher preparation in geography.

These geographic alliances have grown to be sources of considerable energy in statewide efforts to stimulate educational reform and expand the public consciousness regarding geography education and its importance (Salter, 1986). The National Geographic Society, led by the continuing concern and interest of Gil Grosvenor, has invested significant capital, professional energy, prestige, and management skill to this grassroots alliance effort (Grosvenor, 1985).

With the establishment of the National Geographic Society's Education Foundation in January of 1988, there is now a permanent funding source to support and help direct these 41 state alliances in their efforts to improve geography education all across America.

Schoolwide Solutions. American education continues its tradition of the idiosyncratic, individualistic, and locally directed school unit. Although every state has its nested domains of authority and responsibility that link individual classrooms with a state superintendent and a state department of education, teachers continue to have reasonable capacity to shape what goes on in their classrooms. In the same mode, schools have some latitude for policy decisions and curriculum design despite layers of administration above and below them.

Such relative autonomy can promote decisions about what educational goals to set for each school, or each grade, or each block of grades. A school, for example, has the capacity to make a decision to raise money for the purchase of modern, accurate maps and globes that label the world as it exists today. A school can enlist the aid of local service clubs as it tries to obtain geography materials that deal with the contemporary world. A principal can build a popular case for explaining that no child should grow up looking at a globe that has parts of Africa marked "Unexplored" or countries named "Rhodesia" and "Belgian Congo."

Schools can become involved in the American Express Geography Competition announced in 1989. The National Geography Bee is open to students from fourth to eighth grade throughout the country. Local parent-teacher groups can sponsor and promote geography projects, field trips, mapping, surveys, and competitions. A Little League of Geography sounds like an exhausting endeavor, but if even 25 percent of the organizational energy and community support attracted by Little League baseball could be devoted to a geography effort (or any academic effort), parents and educators alike would see a surge in student interest and competence. Well-organized and substantial competitions have been created by the National Council for Geographic Education and can serve as rallying events for school groups of all ages.

The most significant aspect of this level of involvement is the realization — by parents, students, and administrators alike—that a school defines most of its own success. Parental involvement, the promotion of teacher creativity and innovation, and community support for educational excellence all have the potential for enormous impact on a school's success and self-esteem.

Parental Solutions. When geographers get together and talk about the things that have brought them to this curious discipline, one of the most common sources of dedication is early travel with family, or at least the possibility of travel and associated exploration of maps. Countless people I have met during these last few years of active involvement in promoting geographic thinking and teaching have trotted out stories of early map fascination.

The map — and it need not be a brand new one in this case — is almost unmatched as an agent of imagination. To lie on the floor or sit at the kitchen table, map spread out before you, is to have all limits removed. For as little as half a dollar at a Thrift Shop, one can purchase a back issue of *National Geographic* magazine and associated maps. These maps are like magic carpets for children as they begin to think about distant places and their characteristics. And the places may be no more distant and unusual than the towns in the next county or state. The energy in that fantasy is the essence of geography.

Parents are an extraordinary force in the positive education of their children, even without the necessary tutorial work. For example, just the presence of books, maps, atlases, a globe, or a casual curiosity about the nature of current events can set thought in motion. Action may follow. A student at any grade level trying to answer a question asked at the dinner table will become a better, more attentive student, not just in geography, but in all aspects of schooling.

Although they may risk being told, "That's BORING!!!" when they comment on some landscape feature along the roadway, parents can help to bring focus to a child's mind simply by their questions and observations. When geography is presented in terms of compelling roadside attractions, small seeds of interest can be sown, even in minds that are intensely attempting to manifest indifference!

As much as a geographer hates to admit the power of popular board games with geography theme sections, these games are effective in introducing such considerations into the family culture. Trivial Pursuit and Global Pursuit have been enormously popular, and such marketing success supports the notion that people have more interest in geography and its content and concerns than current surveys might suggest.

The role of the parent in shaping the child's appreciation for all education is monumental. Whether in a single-parent family, a family of reconstituted units, or a traditional nuclear family, the child is continually conscious of family dynamics. All school-age minds ask, What rewards are there for good and productive schoolwork and progress? What are the costs of sloppy work? How much effort do Mom and Dad (or any of the other players now common in American households) make to get to school conferences? What comments do parents make on the work brought home or displayed in school hallways? The child has both emotional and intellectual feelers out for answers to these queries. At home or while traveling, conversations about themes in the landscape of contemporary and historic events are part of geography, and parents can add great significance to such conversations.

Individual Solutions.

Education, like the whole fabric of life, comes down to individual responsiveness. If you have read to this point in this essay, you clearly have an interest in geography and understand the necessity for taking some responsibility in this educational domain.

The individual can play a key role simply by taking a personal interest in promoting better understanding of the earth's landscape and its cultural, political, and economic patterns. Helping Geography Awareness Week get national recognition through a letter or call to your representative in Congress is significant. Letters to the editor regarding errors or omissions in things geographic in the media — like maps and articles — help bring attention to the importance of such facts.

Personal efforts to call attention to the need for more emphasis on geographic learning at school board meetings, at open town forums, in educational conferences, and in any civic meeting can lead to both increased public awareness and personal satisfaction. Attempting to stimulate change in the American educational system can be a heady experience, one that leads to a fuller understanding of how educational change happens, no matter what subject you are promoting.

As with all innovations, success requires knowing that you are effecting some change (even if it is minor) and that you are making an honest and intelligent effort toward reform. Educational reform in geography is very much attuned to these dynamics of satisfaction.

Individual perspectives are the basic units of such change and serve as the beginning point for all significant rethinking of the American curriculum. Since geography is built around the understanding of patterns and processes, this dynamic of change should also characterize geography education.

Conclusions. Think of two scenes. In one hemisphere of your consciousness, have students whose geographic skills and knowledge are limited to their capacity to know where to park their cars and how to find the alleys that will allow a speedy approach to a fast food drive-thru. Their worlds are fundamentally proscribed by a spatial, known world that is barely several communities wide and characterized primarily by the people they have grown up with. The geography of their universe is local, limited, and generally lacking in the diversity that is looming ever larger on our nation's horizon.

In the other hemisphere, people your consciousness with students who know the geographic components of their own world —knowledge that is an essential part of gaining independence — but also have awareness of and interest in lands and situations beyond the local horizon. This group, using geographic skills, knowledge, and inquiry to begin to see the significance of distinct religious preferences, political convictions, economic systems, and contrasting environments, will experience the excitement of ever-growing education that will serve them all their lives.

Such wide-ranging knowledge and understanding — and the thrill of learning — is the essence of geography.

We should all work with focused energy to have powerful learning experiences in all of the education that surrounds us. Geography, well-taught and well-learned, has an enormous role to play in such education. The NAEP survey suggests where we have to stimulate change if we want to see effective geography education enter, evolve, and flourish in the American classroom. There *is* a magic carpet here. It is geography — well-taught, well-learned, and well-understood.

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